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SUBJECT: SAUDI CROWN PRINCE VISIT FOCUSES ON LEBANON, CLOSE
TIES WITH CHIRAC, BUT CONCLUDES NO NEW CONTRACTS

Classified By: Acting DCM Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment: GoF contacts report that Lebanon and Syria were the main topics of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's recent meetings with President Chirac, with both sides agreeing on the need for full Syrian withdrawal, rapid formation of a Lebanese government and holding of free and fair legislative elections on time. GoF contacts reported that the Saudis were looking for French reassurance that UNSCR 1559 did not target Syria, and President Chirac affirmed that the GoF was focused on Lebanese sovereignty, not regime change in Damascus. Other topics discussed during the Abdullah visit included Iraq, Middle East peace efforts, Iran and terrorism (see text of joint communique in para 7.) GoF contacts stressed that the Abdullah visit was fundamentally political in nature and not focused on concluding new commercial contracts, in the wake of erroneous French press speculation that major contracts would be concluded during the visit, including a protocol to order some 48 Rafale fighters from the GoF. End summary and comment.

12. (C) Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah paid an official visit to France April 13-15, his first since 2001. President Chirac hosted the Crown Prince for a dinner on April 13 and a working lunch April 14, while PM Raffarin hosted a dinner for the Crown Prince on April 14. Chirac reportedly had two one-on-one discussions with Abdullah April 13 and 14, while FM Barnier had a similar one-on-one discussion with Saudi FM Saud al-Faisal April 13. We received readouts on the Abdullah visit April 18 from Presidential Middle East Advisor Dominique Boche and MFA DAS-equivalent for Iraq/Iran/Arabian Gulf Affairs Antoine Sivan, who both cautioned that they did not have many details on the Chirac-Abdullah discussions due to the closed nature of the meetings. French and Arab media coverage of the visit highlighted the close, personal ties between Chirac and the Crown Prince, who praised Chirac for his morality, sincerity and humanity in an April 13 "Le Monde" interview. Chirac, in remarks welcoming the Crown Prince April 13, reaffirmed the GoF's desire to take its strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia to a higher level, and paid tribute to Crown Prince Abdullah's ambitious program to transform Saudi Arabia, "while respecting its special identity." French press also noted that Chirac took the unusual step of accompanying the Crown Prince to the airport for his April 15 departure.

SYRIA/LEBANON

13. (C) Boche and Sivan reported that Lebanon and Syria were the main topics of the Chirac-Abdullah discussions, with both sides agreeing on the need for full Syrian withdrawal, rapid formation of a Lebanese government and holding of legislative elections on time, or with a slight technical delay at most. (Note: On the latter point, a well-informed local Lebanese journalist told us that Saudi FM Faisal met privately with a number of Lebanese opposition members and Lebanese Christian Presidential hopefuls while in Paris, and reportedly told them that they should be willing to accept a slight delay in the elections if necessary, but they should insist on a date certain for the ballot if it were to begin after the May 31 deadline. End note.) Boche described the Saudis as especially sensitive to the issue of Syrian stability. On this point, he noted that Chirac reassured the Crown Prince that UNSCR 1559 was focused on Lebanon's sovereignty and independence and that France was not seeking regime change in Syria. On Lebanon's situation post-Syrian withdrawal and post-elections, Boche said the Saudis maintained that, in accordance with the Ta'if accords, Lebanon should maintain a special relationship with Syria, albeit a more equal one than the past. Boche said the Saudis were also concerned about the "strategic void" vis-a-vis Israel which the Syrian withdrawal would create, an argument which he noted was similar to Hizballah's justifications for not disarming. Nonetheless, Boche said the Saudis shared French views on the urgency of a Syrian withdrawal, and the need to remain vigilant on the withdrawal of undeclared security services. On assistance to Lebanon after elections, Boche said Chirac and Abdullah agreed that we would need to wait to hear the views of Lebanon's new elected government, once it appears, and that Lebanon should not be placed under international tutelage.

MIDDLE EAST PEACE EFFORTS

14. (C) Boche noted that the Crown Prince raised the relaunch of his peace initiative at the recently concluded Arab League summit in Algiers and emphasized that the Arab world needed to reiterate its readiness for peace. Boche added that Chirac and Abdullah agreed that Gaza disengagement needed to succeed and that the international community, particularly Israel, needed to do more to help President Abbas. Saudi FM Saud al-Faisal, in an interview published April 16 in the French daily "Le Figaro," criticized Israel for rejecting the Saudi peace proposal out of hand and said that Gaza withdrawal would "lead nowhere" if it did not lead to further Israeli withdrawals, roadmap implementation, and a return to the Madrid Conference principles.

IRAQ, IRAN

15. (C) Sivan described a total convergence of views between Chirac and the Crown Prince on Iraq, with both sides agreeing on the need for all of Iraq's communities (read Sunnis) to be included in the Transitional Government and constitutional drafting process. He added that the Saudis expressed concern about Iranian infiltration in Iraq and the degree of Iranian influence on Iraq's Shi'a leadership. The Saudis expressed similar concern regarding the progress of Iran's nuclear program, which they viewed as unjustified, and were supportive of EU-3 efforts to resolve the issue diplomatically with Tehran. Sivan said the Saudis also expressed concern about Kurdish separatism in Iraq, but to a lesser degree than their concerns on Iraqi Shi'a issues. Boche commented that the Saudis were not thrilled with the selection of Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani as Iraq's president, but that they were nonetheless committed to working with Iraq's new government.

NO CONTRACTS CONCLUDED

16. (C) Amid widespread French media focus on the potential commercial windfall of the Crown Prince's visit, Boche stressed that the focus of the visit was essentially political in nature and that no major contracts had been concluded. While the GoF sought to increase its commercial ties with Saudi Arabia, Boche claimed that French economic relations with Saudi Arabia were largely symbolic and had long been overshadowed by political cooperation. Therefore, new contracts were not a GoF objective for this visit. (Comment: French press speculated on potential breakthroughs on a number of major contracts with a combined value between 10 to 20 million euros, including the long-discussed, estimated 7 billion USD "Miksa" electronic border monitoring project pursued by Thales for over 10 years; a proposed purchase of 48 French Rafales fighter aircraft from Dassault; an order for 20 Airbus A380s from Saudia Airlines; and the construction of a rail line from Jeddah to Mecca. An April 15 report in the French economic daily "Les Echos" claiming that a protocol had been signed to purchase, before the end of 2005, some 48 Rafales with an option to purchase up to 48 more, was later denied by Dassault. End comment.) On other economic issues, Boche noted that the GoF offered support for Saudi Arabia's WTO accession and conclusion of an FTA between the EU and the GCC in the joint communique issued April 15 (see para 7).

TEXT OF SAUDI-FRENCH COMMUNIQUE

17. (U) The following is a GoF English-language translation of the April 15 joint Saudi-French communique. Begin text:

At an invitation by President of the French Republic Jacques Chirac, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Abdullah Ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Vice President of the Council of Ministers and Head of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, visited France on an official visit from April 13-15, 2005. The two parties conducted in-depth discussions on matters of common interest concerning the means of strengthening and developing bilateral relations.

With regard to the situation in Lebanon, the two countries have noted Syria's commitment to withdraw in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1559. The two countries support the independence of Lebanon, its security and its stability. They also call for the formation of a Lebanese government as rapidly as possible and the holding of free and democratic elections within the prescribed deadlines.

The two countries stressed the importance they ascribe to the Security Council resolution providing for the establishment of an international commission of inquiry to elucidate the circumstances of the assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafik Al-Hariri and they demand of the Lebanese

authorities to cooperate, under the resolution, with a view to establishing the truth and punishing those involved in this terrorist crime.

The two countries reiterated their encouragements for the actions conducted with a view to restarting the peace process in the Middle East in accordance with the international resolutions and the roadmap, which provides for a solution based on two independent states living side by side in peace and security. They also welcomed the reaffirmation by the Arab countries, at the close of the Algiers Summit, of their commitment to the peace initiative put forward by Prince Abdullah and adopted by the Arab Summit in Beirut.

They reaffirmed their commitment to peace and security in Iraq, to the safeguarding of its unity and its sovereignty. They called for participation of all Iraqi people in the political process. Saudi Arabia and France also insisted on the need to activate international cooperation in the fight against terrorism and its sources of financing. They have planned to deepen their cooperation in this regard within the framework of the United Nations.

France expressed its satisfaction with regard to the moderate oil policy conducted by Saudi Arabia that aims to preserve stability in the oil market as well as to foster global economic growth. The two countries have agreed to strengthen their cooperation on the economy, investments and cultural ties within the framework of their strategic relations. Saudi Arabia has also declared that it appreciates French support for its joining the World Trade Organization and its signing the Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

End text.

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